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AN ANALYSIS OF EFFORTS TO CONSTRUCT ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

(Interim Report)

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Prepared by the

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and the

Richmond Regional Planning District Commission

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AN ANALYSIS OF EFFORTS TO CONSTRUCT

ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Much has been written and said about the need to develop housing that fits with the environment, that does not ignore or try to reshape the surrounding environment. Much has also been written and said about the need for affordable housing, especially for low and moderate income families. To the writers' knowledge, however, not much has been written or said about combining these two worthwhile goals.

In an attempt to determine what, if anything, was being done to tie these two concepts together, staff of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission and the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission began to look at these two issues together. Specifically, staff wanted to investigate the availability of information about best management practices aimed directly at serving the needs of medium priced housing. While staff assumed such activity was underway, there appeared to be little published information available on the topic. Such information would be beneficial to all the localities in this region as they plan for encouraging affordable housing and attempt to adequately protect the environment.

During the course of the year it became apparent to staff that the scope of the project needed to be expanded. The investigation should go farther then best management practices. It should examine any work being done in the field of affordable residential development which incorporated environmental protection in its broadest sense into the design. This concept was presented to the staff of the Department of Environmental Quality who agreed.

In our attempt to find information on this topic, staff of RRPDC and HRPDC contacted a variety of organizations. Following is a list of agencies contacted.

American Institute of Architect
American Institute of Architect--Virginia Section
American Planning Association
American Society of Landscape Architects
Chesapeake Bay Local Assistance Department
Fifth Planning District Commission
Homebuilders Association of Richmond
Lower James River Association
National Association of Regional Councils
National Association of Homebuilders
North Carolina Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources

Peninsula Housing and Building Association
Tidewater Builders Association
Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development
Virginia Housing Development Authority
Virginia Housing Study Commission

While each agency evidenced a sincere interest in the topic, few were able to give staff any concrete assistance on actual work being done in this field. Some agencies were, however, able to give staff recommendations regarding individuals or agencies that may help with this inquiry. Staff followed up on some of this references and was able to determine that there is extensive interest in the development of environmentally sensitive affordable housing.

The work of Randall Arendt is often referenced. Mr. Arendt has gained a national reputation based upon a work which he co-authored. This book is entitled Dealing with Change in the Connecticut River Valley: A Design Manual for Conservation and Development. Mr Arendt has made presentations on this topic in this region and makes a strong case for developing with the environment, not in conflict with the environment. In addition, Mr. Arendt's concept attempts to provide a realistic compromise between the needs of a developer to make a profit and a desire to design with nature. While Mr. Arendt's work is significant, it deals with designing with nature on the macro level and is not aimed at affordable housing. Still, his concepts can be helpful in this field.

The Lower James River Association has also attempted to provide information that could be used to develop with the environment. Their publication The Lower James River Watershed: Strategies for Resource Protection and Sustainable Development examines the needs of the James River watershed and presents examples of sensitive development from numerous localities.

Several examples of residential development that attempt to blend in with the environment can be found in this region. These include Ford's Colony, Gatling Point, Governor's Landing, Jordan on the James, Kings Mill and the Vineyards at Jockey's Neck. While all of these are excellent examples of residential development that attempt to harmonize with the surroundings, all of the housing in these developments are aimed at upper level income families. None are aimed at the affordable housing market.

In addition, there is a national effort afoot to develop "green housing". Our current understanding of this concept is that it goes beyond the concept of environmentally sensitive subdivision development. It incorporates actual modifications in housing design and construction techniques to make each housing unit adapt to environmental constraints and realities. There is a group formed in Richmond, Virginia, which will examine the concept of "green housing".

During the coming year, staff of RRPDC and HRPDC will continue to investigate the issue of environmentally sensitive affordable housing. Staff will continue to contact various agencies and individuals about the topic. As stated previously, some of the organizations contacted made suggestions about additional contacts that may be helpful. Furthermore, staff will also continue to learn about the concept of "green housing" and its relationship to the topic. Attention will also be given to work being done in other parts of Virginia.

As indicated previously, Tidewater Virginia has a number of examples of environmentally sensitive housing developments. All of those that are cited frequently as models, however, are aimed at the high end of the housing market. During the ongoing investigation into this topic, staff will attempt to determine the factors that have led to this situation. These factors could include the cost of the site amenities or environmental management features included in the development, a lack of knowledge of lower cost options on the part of the development community, a perceived lack of interest in such features on the part of the consumer or other factors.

At the same time, staff will continue to examine these higher cost housing developments that have incorporated environmentally sensitive design into the site plan. Much is to be learned from the developments. They certainly have attributes that could be emulated elsewhere.

Our goal is to determine if environmentally sensitive development and affordable housing are compatible. If these two desirable objectives can be met in the same development, this will be an asset to local governments, local developers and to future residents of the Tidewater area.

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